

Totalitarianism Explained by the Man Who Knows it Best: Zbigniew Brzezinski

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Will totalitarianism make a comeback? We asked Zbigniew Brzezinski.



By [Charlie Jane Anders | io9.com](#)

Totalitarianism towered over the 20th century — a leader-focused, oppressive form of rule in which the individual was crushed. Now it seems to have receded as an ideal. But will it be back? We asked the expert, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Brzezinski is best known for having been the National Security Advisor in the Carter Administration, and for helping to dismantle the Ford Administration's

policy of detente towards the Soviet Union. But in the 1950s, he was one of the main scholars developing the theory of totalitarianism, and helping to spread the idea that both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union represented examples of this type of system.

He's currently Robert E. Osgood Professor of American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and a scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

So when we were wondering if totalitarianism was discredited for good, or if it might still stage a resurgence, we could think of no better person to ask than Brzezinski. Here's what he said, via email.

You helped pioneer the idea of totalitarianism as a system of government. Do you think totalitarianism has been discredited as a form of government in the past couple of decades?

"Totalitarianism has been discredited during the past several decades, but that does not mean that it cannot reoccur. However, the discerning aspect of totalitarianism is not simply that it is "totally" in control of society, but that it tries to change society according to a dogmatic blueprint, the latter usually being described



as “ideology.” For the time being, there is no total ideology of change being advocated by any serious political grouping.”

Does the rise of surveillance technology like ubiquitous video cameras and wiretapping make the rise of a new form of totalitarianism more likely? Could we see a new form of electronic totalitarianism for the 21st century?

“If a new doctrine of total change arises, abetted and advocated by fanatics, then we might have another case of totalitarianism, one that will then benefit from the highly technological advanced forms of social control available to dictatorships.”

On the other hand, do you think that the ability of people to share information anonymously online would make it impossible to suppress dissent as thoroughly as former totalitarian regimes such as the USSR once did?

“It is more difficult to isolate societies from outside influences because of modern means of communication – but a truly fanatical regime, armed with the most advanced technology, could probably maintain such isolation for awhile. Nonetheless, the key issue is whether a new doctrine of total social change is likely to appear in the foreseeable future, and for that there is no categorical answer.”

Send an email to Charlie Jane Anders, the author of this post, at charliejane@io9.com.

EDITOR’S NOTE; I couldn’t help notice Zbigniew’s “*total social change*” “*ideology of change*” thing being mentioned three times in his response. It’s almost like reliving September of 2008. In case you didn’t know, Zbigniew held *two* slots as Obama’s advisor; both for foreign policy, as well as Obama’s economic advisor (baffling in the last case, as Zbigniew is never proffered as an economist.) It seems Zbigniew has put all this behind him already, however. Only two years later, Zbigniew is already looking for a “*new doctrine of total social change*”; though the “*abetted and advocated by fanatics*” and “*truly fanatical regime, armed with the most advanced technology*”, are all still on the plate.